Ageless songstress plays back soulful memories

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HER scarlet nails and lips pale next to her hennaed hair. Powdered face, *kohl*-ined eyes, she rivets your attention... just like a portrait of her painted decades ago. Sushila Rani Patel, who will celebrate the 97th birth anniversary of her late husband Baburao Patel on April 4, definitely doesn't let age stem her energies. "Usually people only want to talk about my husband," she says about the acerbic film-journalist and producer, wondering: "Why don't you talk about me?"

And there's much to talk about. Award-winning Hindustani vocalist, actress, journalist, botanist, homoeopath — she's done it all. "When my husband decided I should have knowledge of the law, at the age of 60, I did my LLB and LLM — and I stood first," she announces. Yet music remains her ultimate inspiration. "I live for music, all my cells breath it. Through every phase of my life, music has remained constant," says this Akashvani and Doordarshan veteran, who refused to resort to playback singing.

So, the Shiv Sangeetanjali organisation, which the Patels set up in 1961, now has educational and medical wings too, as part of the Dr S R B Patel Trust. As for the cultural wing, events were reactivated in 1983, a year after Baburao's death. While regular concerts promote young musicians, the highlight of the organisation is the annual memorial concert. "Each year, the celebrations get better," says Patel, determined to hold this year's music-and-dance concert in her small garden since the usual venue — the huge backlawns — are under construction. Apart from Chief Minister Vilasrao Deshmukh, who will be chief guest for the April 4 event, the invitees include scientist R A Mashelkar, state Culture Secretary Govind Swarup,

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Sushila Rani Patel sits before an oil painting where her timeless charm was captured in her youth. *Newsline picture by Kevin D'Souza*

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music exponents Naushad Ali, Bhupen Hazarika, Anup Jalota, film-maker Kalpana Lajmi, actors Kanwaljit Singh and Anuradha Patel-Singh, film journalists Rauf Ahmed and Bhawana Somaaya.

Patel is determined to keep the memory of her husband alive though the industry doesn't really remember his vitriolic pen with fondness. "Our magazine, *Film India*, began in 1935 and was one of the first of its kind. I continued it till 1985, as he had dreamt of it turning 50," she smiles, recalling: "My power over English and research skills flowered under him. But it was far from easy. He was a taskmaster and spared no one, including me. I was his wife, secretary, nurse... and he was everything to me." Even when the magazine turned political in 1960 and was renamed *Mother India*, Patel remained by Baburao's side, as he juggled journalism and parliamentary responsibility (he had won the election on a Jan Sangh ticket in 1967).

"We always shared similar interests: medicine, movies, film," she smiles. Of course, it was cinema that brought them together. Patel acted in two of Baburao's films *Draupadi* (1944) and *Gvalan* (1948). "He didn't want me to continue acting after we were married, so I concentrated on exploiting my musical ability — not commercially but creatively," she declares, adding: "Yet, my strongest memories are of him writing — he could work for five to six hours at a stretch. Translating the *Bhagwat Gita* into poetry, articles on homoeopathy, politics or cinema... he was always writing."

Just like she was always singing. However, believing such dedication to be mandatory, Patel is quite disappointed with the music students of today. "Classical music requires tireless effort but now youngsters give up too easily. You need to keep alive that mad spirit inside you," she urges. Of course, she's proud of prize disciple, Preeti Uttam, who has a number of light classical albums and film numbers to her credit.

Despite the general apathy, Patel remains undaunted in carrying forth with her varied plans. These projects include a television serial with actors Kanwaljit Singh and Anuradha Patel-Singh, a recording of rare music compositions and a compilation of Baburao's writings into a book. "I feel very active and can't sing all day," she says simply, before going into the garden to arrange the pots for the upcoming celebration.